**Secondary Literacy Council** 3-24-10

Phone conference with Donalyn Miller, the author of *The Book Whisper*

**Q: How did the idea of your book *The Book Whisper* come about?**

A: I wrote a column featured in “Teacher Weekly”. It was one of their most popular column, and I was asked to write more pieces. This transformed into a blog about teaching practices. The collection of columns and posts eventually turned into the idea of the book.

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**Q: How does your work as a popular author work with your school schedule?**

A: Some days, it is not a good balance but my principal is very supportive. The administration sees the importance of free choice reading and quality reading. I try to limit the time I’m gone from my classroom during the school year. I try to do most speaking engagements and presentations on weekends, Friday, and sometimes I just say no.

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**Q: How do your students view your success?**

A: The students are more interested in the books we have in the classroom and not so much my book. The year the book came out with the specific students in my classroom the students were mostly excited. One student said she didn’t like it because she didn’t think they were special any more

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**Q: Do you think a basal series in a middle school level curriculum is appropriate?**

A: Is this series/basal the only part of the curriculum? I’m reluctant to make judgments about what a district is and is not allowed to do, but I am leery about only offering one way for teachers to teach and students to access learning.

Good quality short pieces of text for modeling and guided reading are extremely important, and a reading series may offer that as long as it is quality.

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**Q: How do you manage one-on-one conference time with a large amount of students (up to 100)?**

A: I have a similar situation with more than 100 students on my roster. I had to rethink how to manage consultation/conferences. I start at the beginning of the list and take as much as I can. This ends up being about 4-5 kids a day. I keep working through as long as it takes to get through everyone and it often takes more than a week to conference with every student.

For my class, independent reading (SSR) only happens during parts of the year. The first part of school year I read WITH them instead of independently to model. Towards the middle of the year I read a little less and conference with kids more. At this time expectations are established in my classroom.

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**Q: Anything you can recommend to motivate struggling students who participate in an intervention program such as READ 180?**

A: I would continue to have increased expectations for these students. Have them read more than 10 books a school year. Once expectations and goals are set, students will go to that level (if expectations are low they won’t go above and transversely for high expectations).

I stress the need to increase your classroom library in order to increase hands-on book experience EVERY day.

As a last resort –I am not above assigning a book to a child that is in the interest of the child if a student does not pick one (or has not had the experience of how to pick books).

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**Q: How do we start the process of increasing books in a classroom with barriers (ex. School board approving reading in the classroom) –am I liable?**

A: I would ask the district’s interpretation of policy –board approval for novel studies vs independent reading or books they come in contact with vs. books coming from home.

Use your professional judgment as to why the students are reading “racy” books –say no or take away if books are being passed around for unethical purposes.

I would also look at the books in the school library to see the books that have been “approved”.

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**Q: Can you tell a story or a comment from readers that have touched your heart?**

A: I receive many teacher emails about how they are changing their teaching practices or trying new practices in their classrooms. I also sometimes get emails from parents telling about the successes of getting their children to read.

One event I hold fondly is when I received a letter in the mail. It was from a doctor in Indiana. He liked the part in the book about keeping a list of books you have read. He kept a list of books he read in his lifetime and sent a photocopy of the list with around 3000 books. He thought I would appreciate this list and I did. (Lifelong readers –yay!)

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**Q: Have you had any luck converting your colleagues’ teaching practices in regards to raising the limit of required book reading?**

A: Changing other teachers’ behaviors can be a slippery slope for anyone! Yes I have had success. I talk a lot (like all English teachers) but parents drove the demand! Teachers were held to these expectations and because of parents who verbally complained.

I have also taught workshops within my district. The changes are slow where teachers are requiring more BUT changes are being made.

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**Q: During independent reading time I am having problems with very low readers (typically boys) who are still hating to read and refusing even after conferences –any advice?**

A: By the eighth grade, students tend to have entrenched behaviors that have worked for these kids for a long time so that is why they are showing these behaviors. These boys have not been successful in reading and have probably given up on themselves. How can we build their self-esteem and get them to succeed?

Try using a non-traditional piece of text: magazine articles, short books, etc.

Choose books at their reading level that also holds their interest. Check with others in your grade level/department/school district to see if any of these high interest low reader books are available. This is hard for one teacher to do alone. Colleagues should work together to identify text that has been successful with struggling readers.

Keep expectations up and don’t give up! Show students you are making an appointment with them in one week and their goal is to read \_\_\_\_ (something attainable), check in with them a day or two before to see if they will be able to meet their goal before the conference. Make sure they know you are not giving up on them!

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**Q: How do you incorporate the state standards components in your class?**

A: I am lucky to have a long block of time (90 minutes). I divide this time into thirds -1/3 independent reading/readers workshop and small group work for skill development (ie. skill is conflict). I do not use the entire independent reading time with this so the students still have independent reading time.

I format my lessons into a whole group lesson then give students time to practice. Students can take the practice home. I then figure out who got it and with them I move on to the next step by having them apply the skill/concept to literature. Those who didn’t “get it”, I give more intervention time.

Concepts and skills –I monitor skills where all children use their self-selected books at their level to see skills and concepts applied (do this selectively not all concepts and skills are appropriate for this format).

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**Q: Are audio tapes a viable substitute to reading independently?**

A: Audio tapes seem to be more appropriate for elementary than secondary. I support unabridged text and unabridged audio as long as the students are reading along with the text. You can use this method as a scaffold as a visual support where the student’s focus is on comprehension and not decoding. This practice is not appropriate if the student is only listening to the audio and not following along with text.

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**Q: What books are you currently reading right now?**

A: Nurture Shock: New Thinking About Children by Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman

–nonfiction –myths about parenting and where the research does not support our beliefs –ex praising students on intelligence actually de-motivates children

-chapter on children rivalry

-chapter on sleep deprivation (moody adolescents actually account for sleep deprivation)

I’m working my way through this year’s Caldacott and Newberry list

Where the Mountain Meets the Moon by Grade Lin

Birds by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life by Annie Lamott–book on writing

Peace Locomotion by Jacqueline Woodson–book of poetry (sequel to Locomotion)

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**Q: How long did it take you to convince your administration you were on the “right track”?**

A: One school year. I kept saying “please, I know this will work, let me try!” and then they said “ok we’ll trust you but your changes need to be shown by the test scores”.

The students’ scores are incredible and no one has questioned me since.

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**Q: How do you follow a strict curriculum map when specific skills are expected to be taught as specific times in all classrooms across curriculum and across departments?**

A: I’m on the district curriculum writing committee and I’m chair of the department, but not all teachers are doing it “my way” and I’ve accepted that.

Skills are still scripted in our curriculum but how we choose to teach that (which books, which methods, etc.) is up to us as professionals. During department meetings we share resources and practices –but the feeling is not there where everyone is doing the same thing at the same time.